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ABSTRACT

The National Council for the Social Studies is concerned with how the social studies teaching profession can enhance learning in history and the social sciences and develop the skills necessary for participatory citizenship. The purpose of this position statement is to demonstrate how testing and evaluating social studies students can contribute to those ends. It is stated that a comprehensive evaluation plan for social studies includes use of both teacher-made achievement tests and standardized achievement tests. It is recommended that tests focus on stated curricular goals and objectives and be used to improve curriculum and instruction. Beyond traditional, objective-type paper-and-pencil tests, evaluators are strongly encouraged to utilize performance evaluation, portfolios of student papers and projects, and essays focused on higher levels of thinking. It also is recommended that social studies evaluation instruments reflect a high degree of fairness to all people and groups; this recommendation is in response to concerns that tests, particularly standardized tests, are biased against persons whose cultures or gender differ from those of the test writer. The position statement closes with a list of recommendations and guidelines for evaluating achievement in social studies. A 9-item list of references is included. (DB)

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NCSS Position Statement on Testing and Evaluation of Social Studies Students

POSITION STATEMENT & GUIDELINES

In the last decade of the twentieth century, contemporary American education is gradually turning from centrally-mandated educational reforms toward improvement efforts based in the schools themselves. Across the nation, citizens and educators are restructuring schools in line with the 1986 recommendations of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession. Although restructured schools may differ greatly from one another, their common denominator is shared decision making and local leadership at the school level rather than a uniform curriculum or accountability defined only by scores on standardized achievement tests. The National Governors Association supports this new wave of educational reform and the reform has received the endorsement of both of the nation's major teacher unions.

The image of the restructured classroom is one in which students participate in higher-order thinking and in which learning activities and curriculum materials engage and challenge them. Student-to-student interaction and cooperation are hallmarks of such classrooms. Restructured schools call for decentralized decision making, differentiating instructional roles according to teaching skills and expertise, and assessment and accountability based on learning outcomes valued by individual schools.

Paralleling this new wave of restructuring are efforts to transform student assessment from an overreliance on machine-scored standardized tests to approaches that balance such measures with alternatives such as performance assessments or authentic assessments. The design of such assessments reflects actual learning tasks such as speaking effectively or taking a reasoned stance on a controversial social issue. They focus on the processes students use, not merely the answers they choose.

In this environment of shared instructional leadership and authentic assessment, the social studies teaching profession can enhance learning in history and the social sciences and develop the skills necessary for participatory citizenship. The purpose of this position statement is to demonstrate how testing and evaluating social studies students can contribute to those ends.

Testing in Social Studies

Evaluation refers to the collection and analysis of assessment information, often in the form of test results, to assist in judging student progress in learning. Social studies educators at all levels recognize a need to evaluate their programs, with testing geared toward measuring and assessing objectives as one of its major components. Social studies teachers test students to gauge how well their students are accomplishing stated learning objectives in order to make informed decisions for improving the effectiveness of their programs

A comprehensive evaluation plan for social studies includes appropriate use of both teacher-made achievement tests and standardized achievement tests. These two types of tests serve complementary, sometimes overlapping purposes. Tests in social studies serve a number of purposes. Social studies teachers use tests:

- to determine the learning needs of students
- to provide learners with information and assistance on their progress toward social studies objectives
- to provide information for assigning grades and for making decisions about promoting students to the next grade level

- to compare the social studies achievement of their students with those of a broad population of students

For assessing individual students' accomplishments in terms of stated social studies objectives, teachers develop tests tailored specifically to the objectives related to the learning experiences in their classrooms. In constructing these tests, teachers may make judicious use of test items developed by the publishers of their social studies textbooks. These tests may be either norm-referenced, to compare students' retention of a body of social studies knowledge and skills, or criterion-referenced, to determine the extent to which each learner has mastered each of a number of specific social studies performance objectives.

Teachers may use published standardized tests to supplement the information derived from locally-developed teacher-made tests. Standardized tests may provide data on how well students in a particular school or school system perform on social studies objectives in comparison to learners in many other schools across their state or nation. In addition, test publishers may provide norms that permit comparison of local students with a wide sample of peers in their particular cultural or ethnic group. Although most standardized tests are norm-referenced, many allow teachers to interpret test results on a variety of social studies skills.

To meet the requirement of content validity, the objectives of published tests adopted for local use must closely match those of the local social studies curriculum. Social studies teachers need to participate actively in content validation as part of the test selection process. By helping to select standardized tests for use in their schools, teachers may discover some important objectives they address inadequately in their classrooms and thereby make adjustments in their curriculums. They may also identify highly valued social studies objectives not represented in any of the published tests and recommend limits for interpreting the results of standardized testing.

As the social studies curriculum requires close interaction with a variety of information media, social studies tests, whether locally-constructed or nationally-marketed, should include items that require students to use and interpret various sources. Tasks in social studies tests should use materials such as maps, photographs, tables, charts, graphs, editorial cartoons, newspaper clippings, artifacts, documents, film or video clips, and audio recordings.

The overriding purpose of testing in social studies classrooms is to improve learning. To accomplish this goal, social studies teachers must be proficient in interpreting and reporting test results, including those from standardized tests. Standardized test data collected in social studies classrooms must be available to the teacher for study. The teacher can then examine the picture they present of each learner and weigh those descriptions against the evidence that has accumulated from teacher-made tests and other measures over weeks and months of social studies learning experiences. Teachers can then make judgments about the appropriateness and effectiveness of their social studies curriculum. To accomplish this, teachers will require some in-service education since the measurement background of teachers varies widely and tests and reporting formats change from time to time and differ from one publisher to another.

Evaluation Beyond Testing

Social studies education, as envisioned by NCSS in numerous publications, involves the acquisition of essential knowledge of history and the social sciences. It entails the development of the skills and attitudes required for competent, participatory citizenship in our democratic society and in the global community. Social studies programs designed to educate for effective democratic citizenship emphasize gathering information from a variety

of disciplines and experiences along with thinking, decision making, communication, social interaction, and civic participation.

Evaluation of student progress in a sound social studies curriculum requires more than the typical objective-type paper-and-pencil test. To gauge effectively the efforts of students and teachers in social studies programs, evaluators must augment traditional tests with performance evaluations, portfolios of student papers and projects, and essays focused on higher levels of thinking. The development of a comprehensive, systematic, and valid evaluation for a social studies program requires the creative cooperation of social studies professionals with educational measurement specialists. Ideally, evaluation design is integral to the curriculum development process and proceeds simultaneously with it.

Fairness in Testing and Evaluation

Social studies educators in our pluralistic society must see that their teaching and curriculum materials are fair to all people, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, beliefs, genders, or handicaps. It follows that they must also assure that all assessment materials, whether produced by publishers or by teachers, are blind to learner characteristics, such as culture and gender.

In recent years test publishers have conducted staff development programs aimed at sensitizing test writers to prejudice, stereotyping, and denigration of particular groups. They have employed item writers from minority groups. In addition, they have subjected their test materials to reviews by members of minority groups and others familiar with the needs and learning styles of pupils from various cultural backgrounds. When selecting standardized tests for local use, social studies educators should review the publishers' tests and their statements on fairness and bias to determine the extent to which the authors and editors have succeeded in making the test fair to all learners. When developing local tests and alternative assessment strategies, teachers should apply procedures similar to those used by test publishers to minimize culture or gender bias.

Just as social studies educators see that the content of testing and evaluation materials and strategies are fair to all, they must also exercise vigilance that they make fair comparisons between their students and others and in their decisions about pupils from test results and other assessments. Test publishers provide national norms to compare student achievement. Test users should examine the composition of the group used to establish those norms and juxtapose the socioeconomic, cultural, and gender characteristics of the local school with those of the publisher's norm group. Many publishers offer norms reflecting the typical performance of specific groups, such as African Americans or Hispanics, and may produce local or state norms as additional frames of reference. Social studies educators can and should avoid the mistake of using only one form of measurement in interpreting their students' test results. Social studies educators can and should use *all* the information available about their students' social studies achievement—data gathered from a variety of assessment instruments and techniques—when making decisions about assigning grades, class placement, promotion, or retention.

Recommendations and Guidelines for Evaluating Achievement in Social Studies

Evaluation in social studies should be based on clearly formulated curriculum objectives that social studies professionals have developed and adopted. Teachers use these objectives for evaluating their performance and their students' achievement. Social studies teachers, curriculum developers, supervisors, and methods professors, as well as scholars in history and the social sciences, must influence testing and evaluation programs through the curriculum

materials used in classrooms and through consultation on the content and behavioral dimensions of social studies tests and other assessment instruments. Only carefully designed evaluation strategies and tests will enable social studies educators to assess both the academic content and the thinking or performance skills stated in or implied by the objectives.

To improve the assessment and evaluation of student achievement in social studies, the NCSS Advisory Committee on Testing and Evaluation has recommended the following guidelines:

Evaluation instruments should:

- focus on stated curriculum goals and objectives
- be used to improve curriculum and instruction
- measure both content and process
- be chosen for instructional, diagnostic, and prescriptive purposes
- reflect a high degree of fairness to all people and groups

Evaluations of student achievement should:

- be used solely to improve teaching and learning
- involve a variety of instruments and approaches to measure students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes
- be congruent with both the objectives and the classroom experiences of the students examined
- be sequential and cumulative

State and local education agencies should:

- secure appropriate funding to implement and support evaluation programs
- support the education of teachers in selecting, using, and developing assessment instruments
- involve teachers and other social studies professionals in formulating objectives for social studies instruction and evaluation and in the design and selection of social studies evaluation instruments
- measure long-term effects of social studies instruction

In an era of teacher empowerment and school-based curriculum reform, the opportunities for improving teaching and learning in social studies seem boundless. Testing and evaluation of social studies student achievement should support such efforts. Nevertheless, a caution from an earlier period (*NCSS Position Statement on Graduation Competency Testing in the Social Studies*, 1978) bears repeating:

> We hope that preoccupations with testing programs do not deflect social studies educators from the important responsibilities of communicating to parents, legislators, and community members the purposes of social studies instruction and of continuing to provide the highest possible level of social studies instruction.

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